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CT's Lousy Job of Selling Itself to Potential Tourists at Darien North Rest Stop: Cameron on Transportation

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First impressions count. Arrive at any airport or train station, and you immediately start forming opinions of your destination. Is it clean and modern, warm and welcoming? How does the place make me feel? Are the locals proud of themselves?

Well, the same first-impressions rule is true when driving.

“Welcome to New Jersey,” said the perky young lady behind the tourism desk at a service area off Interstate

80 in the Garden State.

I was just looking for the restroom, but this woman made me feel welcome, offering maps and brochures and was ready to answer any questions I had about the Garden State.

I got the same vibe arriving in Maryland, driving south on Interstate 95 where a big, mall-sized rest area in the median offered about a dozen restaurant choices, relatively cheap gas and room to stretch my legs.

On the far side of the building, there was parking for about 50 trucks and electric hook-ups so they didn't need to idle their refrigerator units.

In Virginia, the tourist center looked like a mini-Monticello and the helpful staffers were ready to answer all of our questions about our planned tour of Civil War battlefields. These locals were better than TripAdvisor and the AAA Guidebook.

But that first impression is far different when tourists arrive in Connecticut on I-95.

After crossing the New York border, motorists are immediately hit with bumper-to-bumper traffic, for no apparent reason, no matter the time of day. No accidents, just normal conditions on our major interstate.

The large electronic sign flashes "Delays: Exit 2 -16, next 16 miles" as visitors inch along over the Mianus River Bridge, which collapsed and killed three people in 1983.

But there's no plaque or historical marker noting the tragedy. In fact, the bridge has been renamed after state Sen. Michael J. Morano — as if a name change would erase what happened.

The dialogue inside one of the cars passing through Connecticut for a family trip might go something like this:

"Are we there yet?" one kid asks from the back seat.

"Not even close," moans dad, wondering if they'll ever get to the Cape.

"But dad, I gotta go," the child replies. "I've been holding it ever since the Cross Bronx!"

Then, like a mirage on the horizon, dad sees hope: not a break in the endless traffic, but the state's first service area in Darien.

When the family arrives at the shiny new service area, featuring expensive gas, solar collectors and an unused Tesla charging station, they have the usual culinary options of Subway and McDonald's plus It's Sugar, Chipotle and the recently closed Cheese Boy. Yummy.

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There is no welcoming tourism guide, just a few brochures strewn about, because the state doesn't have the funding. Imagine the business the state's \$8 billion tourism industry loses because we can't staff a simple information desk at a service area where thousands stop each day.

First impressions do count. And the first impressions we give visitors to our state aren't really positive, are they?

See also:

- [Air Marshal Service, Created to Prevent Trouble, Is Itself Troubled: Cameron on Transportation](#) (June 17)
 - [Other Than DC-to-Boston, Long-Distance Train Travel's Days Are Numbered: Cameron on Transportation](#) (June 11)
 - [Train Ticket Scofflaws Avoid Eye Contact With Conductors and Are Seldom Challenged: Cameron on Transportation](#) (June 4)
 - [Forestalling Tolls and Tax Increases Won't Keep Bridges from Rotting: Cameron on Transportation](#) (May 27)
 - [The Rise and Demise of New York City's First Subway: Cameron on Transportation](#) (May 20)
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